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## **A squabble about a newspaper, a fur coat and an election Gyurcsany on show**

AS ONE of the country's richest men, Ferenc Gyurcsany can afford the sleekest of fur coats. So it was something of a surprise to find the Socialist prime minister appearing in an advertisement wrapped in a scraggy-looking pelt. But then one realised that the advertisement had been placed by the main opposition party, the right-wing (and increasingly populist) Fidesz.

The ad's trigger was, rather improbably, a survey of Hungary published in the *Financial Times* last month. One line of the survey provoked much gnashing of teeth at Fidesz's headquarters: "In spite of dangerous imbalances in the economy, Hungarians are better off than ever on average." When the Socialists quoted selectively from this report to their advantage, Fidesz placed advertisements claiming that the government had paid the *Financial Times* a *Bunda* (a fur coat, but also slang for a bribe) of 20m forints (\$95,000) to secure favourable editorial copy.

The government had indeed paid such a sum, but for advertisements in the survey that were clearly marked as such. With an election likely to take place in April, and the Socialists narrowing Fidesz's lead in the polls, Fidesz leaders seem to think that they must snatch any opportunity to knock the government. It speaks volumes for the insular nature of Hungarian politics that nobody seemed to grasp that their advertisement might also be libelling the *Financial Times* and its journalists, who have reacted angrily and demanded an apology and a retraction.

Bashing the foreign press is a popular pastime for Fidesz supporters during elections. In the 2002 campaign a mysterious cabal known as the Kontroll Csoport (Control Group) drew up a list of foreign correspondents supposedly guilty of the thought-crime of "anti-Hungarianness", and published it in the pro-Fidesz *Magyar Nemzet* newspaper. Things turned nastier when several right-wing journalists then appeared on television and verbally abused people on the list, using both anti-Semitic and homophobic slurs.

Fidesz, which was then in power, denied any connection to the Kontroll Csoport. Yet curiously, after a western diplomat had told a government spokesman that such behaviour was not encouraged in countries that wished to join the

European Union, it stopped immediately. And *Magyar Nemzet* performed a prompt U-turn, publishing a series of laudatory articles about those on the Kontroll Csoport list.

This time around Fidesz has taken a more conciliatory position from the outset. When the Hungarian International Press Association issued a statement condemning the *Bunda* advertisements as a slur on the integrity of both the *Financial Times* and its correspondents, Fidesz claimed that the whole thing was a misunderstanding and praised the country's "much-valued" foreign press corps. But the *Financial Times* is still waiting for an apology.